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Changing Air Force Culture Assessment of the Summer 1998 Air and Space Basic Course

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The Air Force has gone through a period of introspection over the past decade. In response to the rapid pace of change in the nature of military conflict, as well as to criticism of the organization from both inside and outside the service, Air Force leaders have recognized the need for a renewed vision of the Air Force's mission and a clearer articulation of institutional values and core competencies. As part of this trend, the top-ranking military and civilian leaders in the Air Force at the fall 1996 CORONA Conference called for the creation of a new training course. The course would be given to all junior officers as soon as they receive their commissions. The purpose of the course would be to inculcate the mission and values of the institution and foster a shared understanding of what it means to be an airman in today's world.

The emphasis was on *shared*, in view of the disparity in commissioning sources. All line officers are commissioned through one of three sources: the Air Force Academy, the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), or the Officer Training School (OTS). Until now, they have received no further professional military education (PME) until seven years into their careers, when they attend Air University's Squadron Officer School at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, the home of all Air Force professional military education. Seven years later, they receive further training at the Air Command and Staff College, and another five to seven years later, at the Air War College. CORONA 1996 called for something new: an intensive training experience, not unlike that of the Marine Corps, that would steep all young officers in the history and culture of the Air Force and place them in physically demanding situations that instill the value of teamwork and camaraderie before sending them off to their first assignments. Air Force Long-Range Planning (AF/LRP) designed the course, and the Air University (AU) was directed to imple-

ment the design and conduct a pilot course in summer 1998 to test the concept.

A recent study published as a doctoral dissertation for the RAND Graduate School (RGS) evaluated the effect of the course on its first class of young officers.¹ In this study, Michael Thirtle, a captain in the Air Force Reserve who served as Deputy Director for Evaluations under the Air and Space Basic Course (ASBC) Commandant and an RGS student, finds that the course fell short of meeting its original objectives and analyzes the reasons for its shortcomings. Besides recommending changes to the course itself, Thirtle proposes that the Air Force adopt a broader perspective toward officer training that will unify course offerings into a coherent system. He also recommends that the Air Force address the more controversial issue of reducing its commissioning sources to a single institution.

NEEDS, OBJECTIVES, AND ORIGINAL COURSE DESIGN

The Air and Space Basic Course (ASBC)—now called the Aerospace Basic Course, or ABC—was intended to address five deficiencies in the officer corps that were identified at the CORONA Conference:

- Officers lack a common view of the core values of the Air Force.
- Officers do not have a clear understanding of Air Force core competencies and Air Force history.
- Officers have not been able to articulate the role of airpower in the realm of joint operations.

¹*Seeing the Lighthouse—As Simple As the ASBC? Facilitating Organizational Change in the U.S. Air Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, RGSD-148, June 1999. The dissertation does not reflect changes in the course curriculum and duration that have been made since October 1998.

- Air Force culture has encouraged officers to identify with their career specialties rather than identifying themselves first as airmen.
- Officers tend to undervalue the importance of teamwork in accomplishing their mission and do not understand how to build unit cohesion and loyalty.

The new course, as designed by AF/LRP, mirrored the Marine Corps' 21-week basic infantry course—The Basic School (TBS)—in duration and difficulty. Although it was to be only 16 weeks long, its objectives were to inculcate “warrior skills” and teamwork. Exercises would place the value of the team ahead of the individual and would build in increasing levels of physical difficulty with each week of the course. The curriculum was to include topics on air and space, information technology—with a heavy emphasis on wargaming, simulation, and operational exercises—doctrine, military history, warrior skills, air team support, ethics, and communications and leadership skills. The course was to culminate in a multi-disciplinary exercise that would integrate the entire 16-week curriculum and would force young officers to work together under intense physical and mental stress.

CORONA 96 also called for two other actions related to the new officer training course: (1) that officers and civilians graduating from the course be sent to operational assignments before performing their functional specialty, and (2) that the Air Force develop a continuing-education plan to reinforce the tenets of the ASBC throughout the new officers' careers.

AU's ASBC: FLAWED PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

The pilot course that was finally offered by Air University in summer 1998 was very different from the initial concept: It was only seven weeks long and focused largely on traditional classroom methods. Although it included an exercise, called *Blue Thunder*, the exercise took up only 15 percent of the course time and was not physically or emotionally taxing.

How did the pilot course stray so far from its original design? Thirtle explains that AU's planning process was dominated by concerns about cost, speed of implementation, and the decision to house the course at Maxwell AFB, where facilities were inadequate to accommodate large numbers of participants. AU chose to analyze four options—a 16-week option for 750 students and 2,000 students, and a 6-week option for 750 students and 2,000 students. The option that was the least expensive and the fastest to implement was the 6-week course for 750 students.

In this process, AU failed to analyze the effect of reducing the length of the course on the achievement of its

original objectives. The length of the course was decided on the basis of cost and ease of implementation, and then curriculum developers were asked to fit as much material as they could into the specified timeframe. The final curriculum also ignored the original objective of modifying the behavior and attitudes of new officers through physically demanding activity that inculcated the importance of teamwork. Curriculum developers did not attend the Marine Corps' TBS, nor did they involve TBS staff in the development of the ASBC or study the TBS course to assess its components.

Although AU created surveys to confirm the needs highlighted by CORONA 96—such as the Shared Institutional Values survey given to over 1,200 students, faculty, and staff within professional military training and the Officer Training School—the staff incorporated neither the results nor the suggestions in planning the course. One of the most interesting results of the survey was that most respondents challenged the view that a new course should be created. They thought that the Air Force could achieve its objectives through existing programs, such as commissioning sources and professional schools.

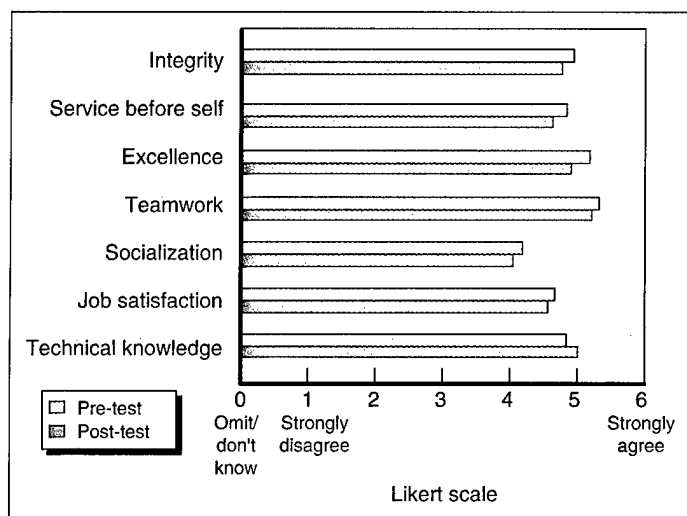
EFFECTS OF THE ASBC ON NEW OFFICERS

Given the way the planning of the pilot course took place, it is not surprising that it failed to meet its original objectives outlined at CORONA 96 and by the AF/LRP. Thirtle and the ASBC team developed a questionnaire that was offered to participants before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the course. It was given to both a *treatment group*—students from each of the three commissioning sources who took the course—and a *control group*—students from the three commissioning sources who did not take the course. These instruments measured gains in cognitive knowledge resulting from the course, as well as changes in attitudes—“affective” changes—in seven areas: integrity, service before self, excellence, teamwork, socialization, job satisfaction, and technical knowledge.

The results showed that the course succeeded in imparting knowledge about Air Force core competencies, and doctrinal and operational matters. Cognitive test scores rose by an average of 30 percentage points from the pre-test to the post-test—a statistically significant amount. In fact, Thirtle finds that the curriculum designers did an excellent job of working within the specific time constraints to convey a complex body of material. However, the course failed to achieve its main objective, which was to inculcate institutional values, such as integrity, service before self, excellence, and teamwork.

On the affective part of the assessment, participants were asked to rank their level of agreement with a series of statements about their attitudes toward the Air Force and their fellow airmen. As the figure shows, their atti-

tudes improved in only one of the seven categories tested: technical knowledge. This category measured participants' confidence in their ability to articulate the cognitive knowledge they learned in the course. Given the increase in their cognitive scores, it is reasonable that students should feel more positive about expressing their new knowledge. Overall, the results on the affective part of the assessment show that the course had a negative effect on the very attitudes it was supposed to improve.² Even more striking, the treatment group's attitudes showed no improvement over those of the control group.



Affective Survey Results

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE ASBC

The study makes several proposals for improving the ASBC:

1. **The course should be redesigned to produce more affective outcomes that are directly related to the 1996 CORONA tasking.** Such outcomes are produced through activities such as more-rigorous physical conditioning, activities that emphasize the importance of teamwork, and more hands-on exercises like *Blue Thunder*. Course designers should visit Quantico, Virginia, to experience the Marine Corps' TBS program firsthand. They should also invite both military and civilian scholars to assist in identifying how to create training exercises that can change attitudes.
2. **The AU should conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine the appropriate duration of the course.** Course planners in 1999 have considered reducing the length of the course to four weeks—a decision based strictly on cost ceilings, not benefits that would be

gained or lost. The Air Force should also consider the possible advantages of passing along responsibility for certain types of instruction to the commissioning sources or other PME programs.

3. **The Air Force should conduct a financial analysis to determine the best site location for the ASBC.** No serious consideration has been given to locating the ASBC at another base or training location besides Maxwell AFB, where facilities are limited. For example, Lackland AFB may have a suitable infrastructure, and the Air Force Academy may be available during off-peak times, such as during the summer. The Air Force, not the Air University, should be responsible for determining the best location for ASBC.
4. **The Air Force should study the possibility of sending ASBC graduates directly to operational jobs (i.e., aircrew, space operations, or information operations) as their first assignment.** This proposal, initially made at CORONA 96, would require significant changes in current personnel processes, such as revising personnel-allocation methods and restructuring career-development paths to fit a model that includes operational experience at an early stage in career development. Existing career-development processes have tended to "stovepipe" officers into a career path at an early stage, and—because they are promoted on the basis of their ability to perform specific tasks within their career specialty—they stay in that path as they progress through the ranks. Encouraging officers to step into an operational job as their first assignment would help break that pattern and create a personnel system that rewards broader growth and experience.
5. **The Air Force should develop follow-up training to reinforce the effects of the ASBC, as called for by CORONA 96.** Training has been shown to have much less effect if it is limited to the initial training activity. However, follow-up training would require more planning and cost.

OTHER STEPS TO IMPROVE TRAINING AND FOSTER ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Beyond specific measures to improve the ASBC, Thirtle makes two other broad recommendations for enhancing professional training and achieving cultural change within the Air Force. The first is that Air Force leaders should view professional development as a coherent system of component parts, each of which provides training appropriate to the different stages of an officer's career. The study points out that the Air Force has not developed an overall strategy for career development—a strategy that identifies what contemporary officers should know, how deeply they should know it, and when the material should be taught to them. Does a young second

²Unfortunately, the analysis design did not provide for an affective post-test for *Blue Thunder*, which may have contributed to teamwork, core values, core competencies, job satisfaction, and technical knowledge. Qualitative responses to the affective survey confirm that this portion of the course is worthwhile.

lieutenant need to know intricate details of the entire air campaign planning process? Or should the lieutenant be taught how to work with enlisted personnel, how to lead and give orders, how to carry himself or herself as an officer? Until the Air Force identifies the education and training needs for each stage of an officer's career, it is difficult for any individual training program to develop an appropriate curriculum.³

Moreover, there is little coordination among commissioning sources and PME schools, particularly at the level of junior-officer education. As a result, the teaching staff are not informed of what other institutions are doing. AU should take the lead in facilitating regular meetings among commissioning sources and school officials to reduce redundancy of material and help ensure that officers are receiving an integrated continuum of training programs from officer candidate to general.

Thirtle suggests that it would be helpful to ASBC planners if AU prepared a report that synthesized the results of its overview of professional military education so that the ASBC curriculum could be conceived of as part of an integrated system. To ensure that the ASBC minimizes redundancy with other courses and is closely linked to what precedes and follows it, ASBC staff should work

together with faculty at the three commissioning sources and at the Squadron Officer School; the Air Command and Staff College; the School of Advanced Airpower Studies; the Air War College; the Air University's College of Aerospace Doctrine, Research, and Education; and the enlisted services schools.

Thirtle's other recommendation goes to the heart of the problem with the culture of the Air Force: the fact that the Air Force commissions officers through three disparate programs. The need for the ASBC in the first place, according to Thirtle, can be traced to the absence of standardization among the officer-commissioning programs. For 40 years, the Air Force has fostered a two-tiered system of officers: Academy graduates and non-Academy graduates. Academy graduates reap a number of benefits not afforded to non-Academy graduates, including a better chance of going to flight training. Given this longstanding distinction, it is not surprising that the service should suffer from a lack of cohesiveness among its officers. Thirtle suggests that no training course can overcome the effects of this organizational structure. He recommends that Air Force leaders consider the creation of a single program for commissioning officers.

³The study finds that the ASBC curriculum included some material that was too low-level and other material that was too high-level for the new officers. Overall, the course material was designed for the "lowest common denominator" of knowledge so that officers from all commissioning sources would have the same foundation. However, the course also covered the air campaign planning process, an activity that most participants would not encounter until they were senior officers.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work that pertains to Project AIR FORCE; it is documented in Seeing the Lighthouse—As Simple As the ASBC? Facilitating Organizational Change in the U.S. Air Force, by Michael R. Thirtle, RGSD-148, 1999, 250 pp., available from RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: toll free, 877-584-8642; FAX: 310-451-6915; or Internet: order@rand.org). Abstracts of all RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). Publications are distributed to the trade by NBN. RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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